

Instant Messengers

Chatting with friends and colleagues in real time on your PC has never been easier. Sue Gee makes contact with eight instant messenger programs and finds it's good to talk

The internet has had an enormous impact on how we shop, how we look for information and how we communicate with each other. One of the most notable developments in this revolution in communications is instant messaging. As its name suggests, this provides a real-time exchange of messages via the internet that allows you to chat with other users on your PC. In this article we've looked at eight instant messengers (IMs) to see what features each product offers.

MAKING CONTACT

Messenger services are useful only once you have established contacts with the other people you

want to interact with. The program resides in the System Tray, running unobtrusively in the background ready for you to contact your friends and co-workers or allowing you to respond when they contact you.

When exchanging messages you'll be able to see clearly which person contributed which line in the dialogue. You can also see when the other person is typing a message, which is helpful if you want to conduct a linear conversation rather than both parties contributing simultaneously, which can result in a disjointed flow of information.

Information on who is online, offline, away or busy is also usually displayed. This is called

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'presence' information and it can be as valuable as the ability to communicate with the user.

Most instant messaging clients also have voice-messaging capabilities – that is, as long as the PCs involved have working microphones and speakers – video-sending facilities if you have a working webcam, and most also have the ability to allow you to send files or photos to your contacts as well.

REVIEW INSTANT MESSENGER

MICROSOFT Windows Messenger 5.1

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE Free with Windows XP

DOWNLOAD 7.25MB

SUPPLIER www.microsoft.com/downloads

The Windows XP operating system includes Windows Messenger, which means you don't even have to download anything to use it. You do, however, have to sign on with a .NET Passport. Microsoft introduced the .NET Passport as a convenient way to sign in to multiple internet sites using a single sign-in name and password. Initially it insisted on users having either a Hotmail or MSN account but later relaxed this to include any email address. Adding contacts who have existing .NET Passport accounts makes it easier to locate them, especially if you know their validated email addresses. If they are not already .NET Passport holders they will have to enrol first.

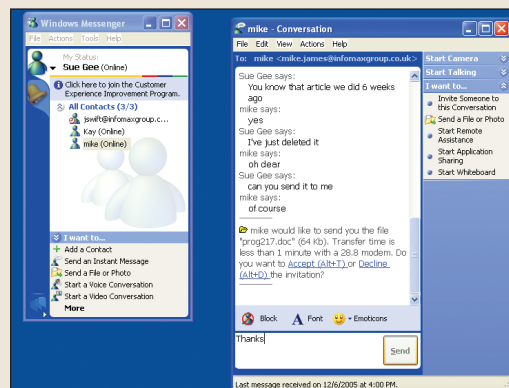
When somebody adds you to their list of contacts, a message alerts you to the fact. It gives you the option of letting them see when you are online or concealing this information. It is possible to override this option so that people can add you to their contact lists without you knowing about it and allowing everyone to see your online/offline status, but this isn't recommended.

You have the options of displaying messages saying Busy, Be Right Back, On the Phone or Out to Lunch, as well as the simple Online, Offline or the Away message that appears after a period of inactivity. This can be useful if you don't want to be disturbed. Windows Messenger also has a Block option. This is rather like a panic button in that you can use it to cut someone off in the current conversation and prevent them from contacting you in future.

Windows Messenger provides a set of emoticons to pep up your messages but on the whole its environment is rather staid; changing the font and its size and colour is about the only other way to express your individuality. It lets you group your contacts into categories and supplies the options Coworkers, Family and Friends, but you can devise your own groups if you wish. You can't send a message to a group, but you can start to exchange messages with a single person, then invite others to join one at a time. However, they won't see the message thread that took place before they joined.

Windows Messenger isn't restricted to text. As well as voice and video messaging it has a whiteboard, which is shared by all the parties to the message session so that you can use drawings in your communications. You can also use it to request Remote Assistance or Application Sharing.

The latest version, Windows Messenger 5.1, is available for download only after your version of



Chat with friends and invite more people to join in the discussion with Microsoft Windows Messenger 5.1

Windows has been validated as being genuine. There are not many obvious new features but it is the required version to take advantage of new features in Microsoft Office Live Communications Server 2005.

Windows Messenger is serviceable, but lacks the frills that other instant messengers offer.

✓ Provides full range of facilities

✗ Lacks the frills that can enliven IM

REQUIREMENTS Windows XP, .NET Passport

REVIEW INSTANT MESSENGER

MICROSOFT MSN Messenger 7.5

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE Free

DOWNLOAD 8.91MB

SUPPLIER www.microsoft.com/downloads



You'll also need a .NET Passport to use MSN Messenger. Most other services insist on collecting your email address and other personal details, though, so if you are put off by this aspect you'll face the same dilemma with Yahoo! or Google. Although you can use an existing email address to obtain a .NET Passport, a free Hotmail address is needed for some of Messenger's services.

MSN Messenger is clearly a development on Windows Messenger (opposite), which it supports, so you can send messages and have conversations with Windows Messenger users. It is free but includes advertising, although this tends not to be too obtrusive. The tabs at the left give instant access to related services such as MSN Alerts and MSN Music, and external websites including the National Lottery site and eBay. There's also a tab for getting help, and if you can't find the answers you need there's more help on the MSN customer care website. As a last resort you can fill in a form describing your problem and email it to the support team. This level of support is part of the reason MSN Messenger receives a five-star rating.

The other reason for the rating is the range of extra facilities. On the fun side, there are games, including chess, minesweeper and tic-tac-toe, or you can swap photos with other users. For more functional tasks, as well as the Remote Assistance and Application Sharing, you can use MSN Calendar sharing for organising your work and social life.

MSN Messenger has an attractive, customisable interface. A range of pictures are supplied for you to identify yourself to others, and you can add your own photos. You can add a Personal Message that others will see, in addition to the status options. You can add a background to the message window, which can be shared so your contact also sees it, but some of the backgrounds on the menu require a purchase to be made. Similarly the optional emoticon packs require payment.

MSN Messenger supports mobile phones, so you don't necessarily need your contacts to be at their computers to send them messages. It has other extra features that users might not necessarily be aware of. For example, as well as the long-standing whiteboard facility, the latest version supports handwriting input. You can also store your message history (although not handwritten items). A final feature that many will welcome is the way it integrates with blogs on MSN Spaces and enables you to alert people to them.

✓ Provides a rich IM environment; excellent support

✗ Includes advertising; requires a .NET Passport

REQUIREMENTS Version 7.5: Windows XP, .NET Passport, 233MHz Pentium processor (500MHz recommended), 64MB RAM (128MB recommended), 15MB disk space. Internet Explorer version 6 SP1 or above must be installed on your computer, though it does not need to be your default browser. Older versions that support Windows 95 onwards are still available.



Lots of extras and good support make MSN Messenger a great place to be



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REVIEW INSTANT MESSENGER

YAHOO!

Yahoo! Messenger with BT Communicator

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE Free

DOWNLOAD 11.26MB

SUPPLIER <http://uk.messenger.yahoo.com>

A prerequisite of downloading this service – or the previous version of Yahoo! Messenger, which lacked the PC-to-phone feature added by BT Communicator – is a free Yahoo! account. The program's facilities are presented in a large panel on the right of the screen. The four icons on the Messenger tab let you add a contact, send an instant message, make a free computer-to-computer voice call or make a computer-to-phone call using BT Communicator, which is a charged-for service, although the rates are cheaper than normal phone calls. Your Yahoo! address book is also displayed here. It's easy to invite any contacts listed here to your Messenger list as long as they have a Yahoo! ID.

Yahoo! Messenger supports file sharing, conferencing with multiple contacts and video. The feature that currently distinguishes it, however, is its voicemail facility. Even if you are offline or away from your PC, contacts can leave you a voicemail message. Your Call History also shows all incoming, outgoing and missed calls.

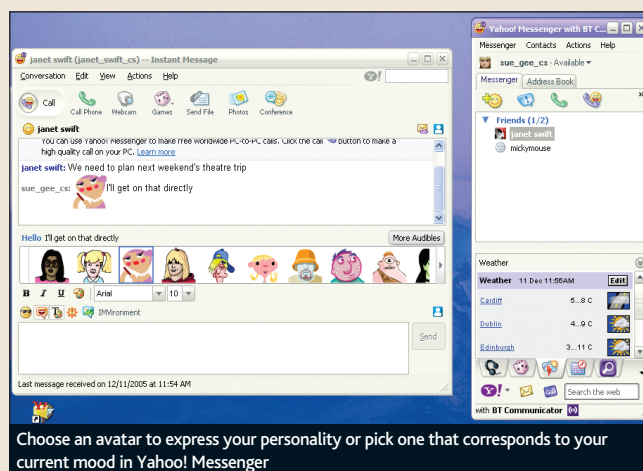
Many of Yahoo! Messenger's additional features integrate well with other Yahoo! content and services. The headphones icon accesses Yahoo!'s LAUNCHcast Radio, which allows you to

create a custom playlist. The Calendar icon opens your Yahoo! personal organiser, another web-based facility, while the dice icon takes you to the games. There's also a weather forecast for selected UK cities and a quick link to BT's 118 500 Directory Enquiries service.

Although the interface looks plain, there's plenty of scope for customisation. You can choose a picture from the supplied choices in place of the default Yahoo! smiley face or use your own. You can also share your avatar, an image that can represent your personality and express different moods. Creating your avatar is done on a Yahoo! website and you can store up to 12 favourites. As soon as you change your avatar or display picture, the changes will take place in open conversations.

As well as modifying the appearance of the Messenger window by selecting different skins and alternative fonts, you can also alter it instantly by adopting a different IMVironment. These are described as "interactive themed backgrounds" and there are several choices. The default shortlist includes Falling Hearts, Harry Potter, Peanuts and Dilbert. Two of them are functional: Doodle gives all participants to the conversation coloured crayons and a drawing surface, while Photo Sharing gives access to any photo albums you have with Yahoo!.

Yahoo! Messenger supplies a range of emoticons to embed in a message, plus 'audibles', which are animated characters that announce



messages such as, "Hello, anybody there?" and "I'll get on to that directly". Another welcome feature is the stealth setting, which enables you to appear online to some users and offline to others.

Yahoo! and MSN are working on a way to connect their respective IM communities to enable the interchange of instant messages between users of both services (see *Newsfile*, *Shopper* January 2006).

✓ Voicemail facility; PC-to-phone feature; highly customisable

✗ Download file is a hefty 11.26MB; advertising

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98/XP; 233MHz Pentium processor (1GHz recommended), 64MB RAM (256MB recommended). Microsoft Internet Explorer version 6 SP1 or above must be installed on your computer, though it does not need to be your default browser

REVIEW INSTANT MESSENGER

GOOGLE

Google Talk

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE Free

DOWNLOAD 841KB

SUPPLIER www.google.com/talk

At the time of our review Google Talk was in beta with a limited number of users, so it's slightly unfair to compare it to mature products that have gone through several development stages. However, Google Talk does exactly what its name would lead you to expect: it lets you talk to your contacts as well as type your messages. At the moment it is a no-frills facility, but at just 841K it is quick to download and it doesn't dominate your working environment when in use.

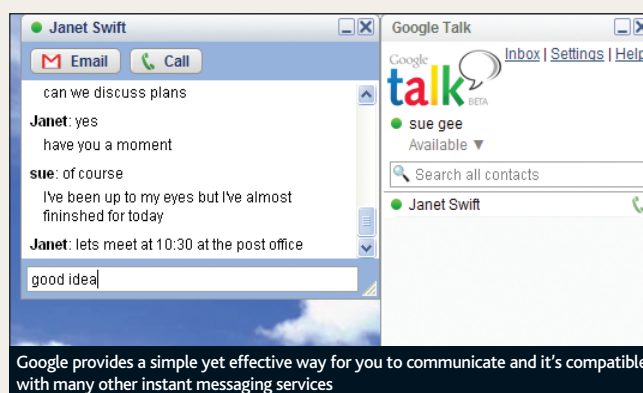
To use Google Talk you'll need a free Google account and a Gmail address. As with other services, only unique names are allowed for such email addresses so you may end up with an unwieldy name, but Google Talk contacts will see the nickname of your choice.

The Add a friend link enables you to invite others to join the service. You can initiate a voice

call with a contact in your list by clicking on the green Call icon. If a call is missed, both parties are notified. In situations where audio would be inappropriate you just click on the contact's name and type in the message entry line.

One feature of Google Talk is that even after you have switched off your PC, lines from previous conversations are still available. This means you can continue a thread over several sessions if necessary. However, it also means the conversation is being stored, albeit locally on your own PC, although this can be switched off in the Settings dialog. The other aspect that you might find off-putting is that when you use the service, Google's servers automatically record certain information about your use of Google Talk, such as when you use it, the size of your contact list and the contacts you communicate with, and the frequency and size of data transfers.

One big advantage of Google Talk is its compatibility with other services, so you can



communicate using text chats with IM clients on other platforms. As well as being able to connect to Google Talk using its own client, you can also use third-party IM clients on Linux and Mac OS X.

✓ Simple and efficient for voice and text messages; compatible with other IM clients

✗ Some security concerns

REQUIREMENTS Windows XP/2000

REVIEW INSTANT MESSENGER

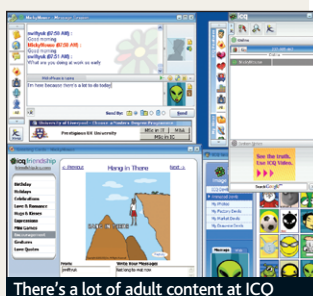
ICQ ICQ 5

RATING ★★

PRICE Free

DOWNLOAD 4.07MB

SUPPLIER www.icq.com/download



There's a lot of adult content at ICQ

There are multiple versions of ICQ available for download. Windows users have a choice of the latest version, ICQ 5, and an older version which is variously referred to as ICQ Pro or ICQ 2003b. The major difference between them is that ICQ 5 includes Xtras, which offers the new user instant contacts. However, these are not necessarily contacts you would want children or young people to investigate. ICQ has many and various online communities, in which anyone can participate.

ICQ suffers from no longer being as popular as other services. Another drawback is that, while some other services don't let you have duplicate screen names, ICQ does because it uses a unique identifier in the form of a number. You can search for contacts using a combination of name, surname and nickname but this could produce lots of mismatches. The suggested solution is to print your ICQ number on your business cards.

There's no getting away from advertising on ICQ. The Message Session window constantly presents ads, which is annoying, and even inappropriate for some users and is one reason why we've given ICQ a low rating.

✓ Emphasis on meeting new people and joining chat groups

✗ Intrusive advertising; content unsuitable for children

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 SE/Me/2000/XP, 350MHz Pentium II processor, 128MB RAM, 50MB disk space, Internet Explorer 5 or above

REVIEW INSTANT MESSENGER

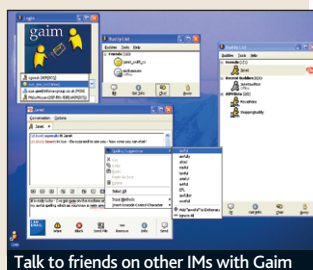
GAIM Gaim 1.5

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE Free

DOWNLOAD 6.64MB

SUPPLIER <http://gaim.sourceforge.net/downloads.php>



Talk to friends on other IMs with Gaim

If your contacts all use different IMs, you can end up with multiple accounts to keep in touch with them all. Gaim is a multi-protocol IM client that could solve this problem. It runs under Windows, Linux and Mac OS X and is compatible with AIM, ICQ, MSN Messenger, Yahoo!, IRC, Jabber and Gadu-Gadu. You can therefore exchange messages with users of all the programs we've looked at here with the exception of Skype.

Gaim users can log in to multiple accounts on multiple IM networks simultaneously, so you can be chatting with a group on AIM, and talking to a friend on Yahoo! Messenger at the same time. It integrates well with the System Tray, so you don't need the buddy list window showing at all times.

Gaim supports many features of the various networks, such as file transfer, away messages, typing notification and MSN window-closing notification. It also has features of its own including Buddy Pounces, which can notify you, send a message or play a sound when a specific contact goes away, signs online or returns. Its plug-ins include a spellchecker that flags unrecognised words and offers suggested replacements. This feature is really useful and, combined with the compatibility with other IMs, makes it a good choice.

✓ Multiprotocol and multiplatform

✗ Rather clunky user interface that lacks frills

REQUIREMENTS Varies according to platform

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ashampoo.co.uk/thebest



REVIEW INSTANT MESSENGER

AOL
AOL Instant Messenger 5.5

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE Free

DOWNLOAD 3.43MB

SUPPLIER www.aol.co.uk/aim

AOL has a huge user base for its subscription service. Its Instant Messenger service, however, is free and can be used by both AOL members and non-members.

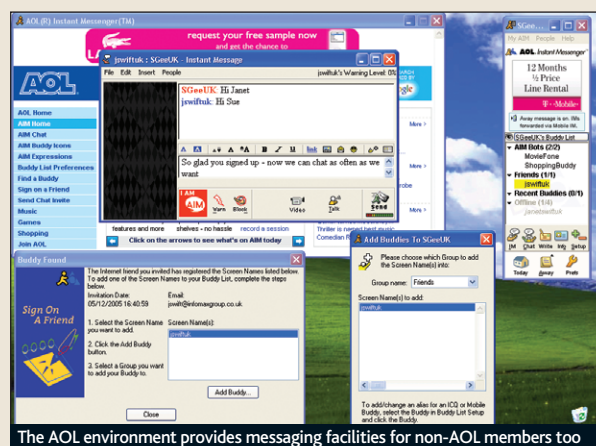
Compared to other IMs, AOL Instant Messenger (AIM) is primitive; the default messaging window has a clunky feel, and even when customised it is not particularly attractive. But it offers the essential facilities of exchanging messages or chatting via typing, talking or webcam. Your contacts are referred to as buddies and cover those signed on to CompuServe 2000 or ICQ as well as those who have downloaded AIM. Its facility to send an email invitation to recruit new contacts proved remarkably slow in our tests, taking almost four hours, which rather defeats the object of instant messaging. Once you have a Buddy List there are no such problems, though. AIM supports exchanges with mobile

devices and uses icons to distinguish between users of devices that permit two-way communication and those unable to respond to messages, and are thus in effect one-way.

The Chat feature lets you exchange messages with several buddies in your own private chatrooms. Alternatively, you can meet in general chatrooms covering topics such as health, romance and computing.

The latest version includes video instant messaging, although this requires a PC running Windows XP or Apple iChat AV version 2.1 or later. Another new feature is the single sign-in for multiple AIM identities, which means you can have a work-related name for professional purposes and a more informal one you share with family and friends, for example. This also means your various Buddy Lists can be amalgamated so you can send and receive IMs from any of your AIM screen names/identities to any or all of your contacts from a single window.

While AIM is free to everyone, AOL members use the same service in a richer environment that is linked to other AOL services. They can choose



The AOL environment provides messaging facilities for non-AOL members too

Buddy Expressions, Wallpaper, Smileys and so on. In most cases these have to be paid for, and free items tend to contain advertising.

✓ Multiplatform

✗ Interface seems primitive

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98/Me/NT4/2000/XP, IE 5.0 or above.
Video IM requires Windows XP

REVIEW INSTANT MESSENGER

SKYPE
Skype

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE Free

DOWNLOAD 8.42MB

SUPPLIER www.skype.com/downloads

Skype is available for Mac OS X, Linux and Pocket PC as well as Windows, and users on different platforms can chat and call one another. Skype is different from the other IMs here in that its main focus is free internet voice calls. Its text messaging facility, Chat, is presented as a secondary service, but it is a capable utility. You can invite multiple contacts into a Chat window and display a topic above the chat window if required. A silhouette is shown next to your name, but there are alternative icons and you can substitute a picture of your choice. As with most other services, you also have control over what information others can view in your profile.

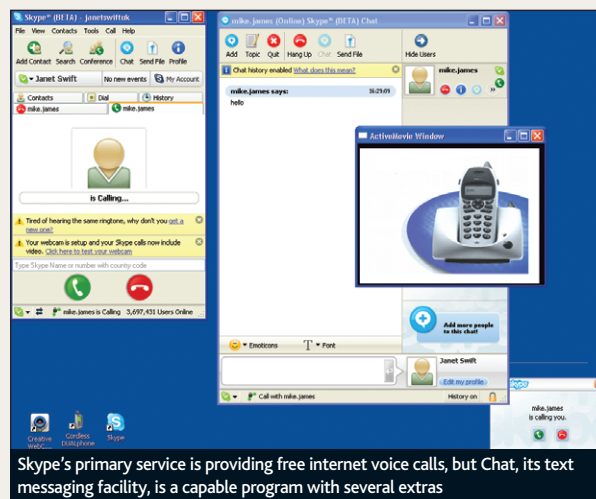
SkypeOut allows you to make calls from a PC to landline and mobile phones. This is a charged-for service that works out cheaper than normal phone calls. Skype also allows you to receive calls on your PC from standard phones. This facility, called Skypeln, was still in beta at the time of writing, with limited coverage. Even so, as the UK and USA are both included it is already having an impact. Skypeln provides you with a regular phone number and you can choose where it is located – ideally the place that allows the maximum number of your friends and family to make a local phone call. If that's London, for example, your

contacts dial a number starting 020 and pay their phone company's normal rates, and you can log into a PC anywhere in the world to talk to them. A Skypeln number costs €30 and can save your contacts a lot on phone calls. A single Skype account holder can have up to 10 Skypeln numbers, so if you have contacts in London, New York and Paris you might purchase three numbers.

Each Skypeln subscription comes with a free Skype Voicemail subscription, which normally costs €15 per year. Skype Voicemail means you can pick up messages, and you don't have to be online for someone to leave a message. You can keep the messages for as long as you like.

The latest version of the program, Skype 2.0, is now in beta. This offers integrated video calling so, with webcams at either end of the conversation, you can see your friends and family on the full computer screen or in the Skype calling window. Other enhancements are a simplified user interface with one-click access to key features and more options for personalisation using avatars and custom ringtones. Even the emoticons are now animated. On a more practical note, Skype 2.0 shows your time zone. This should prevent you waking up your friends or colleagues by forgetting what time it is in their location.

A range of add-ons is available for Skype. Creative Labs has produced a Skype Edition webcam complete with a Skype-certified headset



Skype's primary service is providing free internet voice calls, but Chat, its text messaging facility, is a capable program with several extras

(£30 including VAT from www.dabs.com). Many Skype users may feel more comfortable using a phone rather than a headset, and Skype phones that store your contacts' details help you get the best from the service. The Skype Dual Phone (£80 including VAT from www.skypehandsets.com) is a USB cordless device that gives you the choice of making regular phone calls or Skype calls from a single handset which can be plugged into the phone network and your PC simultaneously. **CS**

✓ Cheap PC-to-phone and phone-to-PC calls

✗ Few extras for chatting

REQUIREMENTS Varies according to platform